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ABSTRACT

A qualitative case study of Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) (in which freshmen enroll in specific thematically linked courses their first semester) was carried out at a large, public, research university. The intent of the study was to understand how participation in a FIG influenced students' learning experiences, and how those experiences fit in with their broader experiences as first year students. The study consisted of three 1-week site visits involving observation in 12 classrooms, 43 interviews with 24 students, and 5 interviews with the FIG coordinator. Study results showed that FIGs allowed students to interact repeatedly with a consistent set of peers across their classes. This, in turn, enabled students to form a social network in which other academic support mechanisms could begin to operate. In addition, Writing Link classes enabled students to balance engagement with course content with the development of social relationships. FIGs are seen as potentially powerful ways of affecting students' first year college experience. Contains 11 references. (GLR)

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Freshman Interest Groups and the First Year Experience:

Constructing Student Communities in a Large University[1]

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Abstract

A qualitative case study of Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) was carried out at a large, public, research university. The intent of the study was to understand how participation in a FIG influenced students' learning experiences, and how those experiences fit in with their broader experiences as first year students. Three one-week site visits were made; data collection consisted of participant observation in 12 classrooms and 43 interviews with 24 students. Three themes are reported here. First, FIGs allowed students to interact repeatedly with a consistent set of peers across their classes. This, in turn, enabled student to form a social network in which other academic support mechanisms could begin to operate. Finally, Writing Link classes enabled students to become engaged with their course content at the same time as they continued their social interactions. The balance of students' social engagement with their academic engagement demonstrates the potential of FIGs to influence students' first year experience.

Freshman Interest Groups and the First Year Experience

The number and range of freshman year programs have grown markedly over the past decade. Where once there were only a handful of "innovative" first year programs, today there are literally hundreds of programs designed to address different aspects of the first year experience. It is little wonder that this is the case. The freshman year has long been known to be a critical time in the lives of students. It is a time of transition and adjustment to the social and academic demands of college, a time when the likelihood of dropout and the possibility of transformative learning is greatest. For institutions, the freshman year is also a period during which programs can have the greatest impact on subsequent student development and persistence. Research studies and policy reports alike have long supported the notion that the potential benefits of programmatic efforts on behalf of student development and persistence are greatest during that year. This is the case because the majority of dropouts either occur in the first year or have their roots in the first year experience.

But while the growth of freshman year programs is a welcomed development in higher education, there is still room for improvement. There remain a number of significant issues about the character and role of such programs in the university that have yet to be resolved. Among them is the issue of the role of freshman year programs in the education of students and in the academic programs responsible for that education.

Despite recent developments, it is still the case that most freshman year programs focus either on the transition to college and the need for orientation that it engenders and/or on the acquisition of minimum learning skills required for participation in the regular curriculum (Gordon, 1989). While it is true that these programs have done much to change the way some students experience their first year of college, it is also true that first year programs have not yet fully addressed the important educational questions that confront faculty, namely: How can academic programs meet the educational needs of first year students and more actively engage them in the educational process?

Not surprisingly, many faculty have been reluctant to grant academic credit to such programs and to participate in programs that are, in their view, the responsibility of student affairs. Though faculty may recognize the value of freshman year programs, they typically see them as useful adjuncts to, rather than integral parts of, the first year academic experience. This may be because many first year programs have had their origins in the work of student affairs and in the orientation programs they developed. Traditionally it has been the domain of student affairs staffs to assist new students in making the social and academic transitions to college, but that focus frequently has hindered their ability to move their programs into the academic mainstream of campus life (Fincher, 1985).

Freshman Interest Groups: An Overview

There are, however, alternatives. Specifically, a number of institutions have turned to learning communities as a way of addressing both the need for educational engagement and social transition (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Though there are many different types of learning communities (e.g. interest groups, coordinated studies, federated learning communities), they all share three common features. First, they require students to take several courses together, most often around a unifying theme. In a very real sense, students travel together through a cluster of courses, some of which may be linked in content and assignments (e.g. English and a content area). Second, they require students to come together for some form of unifying experience that seeks to establish linkages between course content (e.g. an integrative seminar). Third, and perhaps most importantly, they enable students to form a community of learners in which both social and academic integration is possible.

As part of our work for the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, we studied one such learning community at the University of Washington (enrollment approximately 34,000 students). The university established a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program that was modeled after a similar program at the University of Oregon established in 1981 (Gabelnick et al., 1990). The program allowed incoming freshmen to enroll in a thematically linked cluster of three courses during their first (fall) quarter on campus. Some

FIGs had the added attribute of having a writing course linked to one of the two content courses that made up the cluster (a "Writing Link" course). The program began in 1987 with four FIGs. By Fall of 1991, when we studied the program, over 800 students, or nearly one-quarter of the entering class, were registered in 40 FIGs of which nine were Writing-Link FIGs.

The courses that made up each FIG were chosen to reflect a general theme ("Interest"). Of the three courses taken by FIG members, two were large lecture courses ranging in size from 100-700 students. Once a week the large class separated into quiz sections, groups of 20-25 students led by a Teaching Assistant (TA). In quiz sections the TA answered questions or provided her or his interpretation of the professor's lecture. FIG groups were registered so that the members of the FIG became members of the same quiz section.

The third course that made up the FIGs we studied was a Writing Link course. In this course, students linked the information they were writing about with the material from one of the other courses in the FIG. For example, the FIG called "Introduction to the Ancient World" registered students in Survey of Ancient Western Art, The Ancient World (an introductory history course), and Humanities Writing Link. Students wrote papers in the Writing Link class based on information and texts used in their Survey of Ancient Western Art course, and therefore received some overlap of topics. A peer review writing process was used in the Writing Link course. In groups of three or four, students read the writing of their peers and provided written and verbal feedback to the authors. The instructors were available for questions, but were not the focus of attention. After receiving peer review, students met individually with the instructor, then completed a final draft of the paper. The peer review writing process encouraged student-student collaboration as well as student-professor collaboration on writing projects.

In addition to courses, all FIGs included a weekly meeting for one hour with an undergraduate, upperclass Peer Advisor. The Peer Advisor's job was to answer questions about a variety of topics: What is this teacher like? How do we use the library? What is there to do on campus that's fun? How do you use the bus system? The idea of the weekly FIG meetings

was for Peer Advisors to give the students some skills for university survival, and to continue to orient them to the campus and community after the initial orientation weekend was over. The FIG meeting was a one credit course graded on a credit/no credit basis, based on mandatory attendance. It should be emphasized, however, that the FIG meeting was only one hour per week above and beyond the courses in which the students were enrolled.

Method

The Research Question

The intent of this study was to understand, from the students' point of view, how participation in a FIG influenced students' learning experiences and how those learning experiences fit in with their broader experiences as first year students. It was a descriptive study of the FIG program, not an evaluation of the program. This study began with the assumption that FIGs are an effective way to respond to the academic needs of students. The rationale for such an assumption was outlined by Bogdan and Taylor (1990) when they wrote about investigating positive or optimistic approaches to program implementation. Their rationale was that the question "Does a program work?" did little to help practitioners understand how they could implement a similar program and "function[ed] as an exclusionary gatekeeper rather than as an encouraging teacher" (p. 186). Beginning with the assumption that a program such as FIGs worked, we then could go on to ask questions like: How do FIGs work? What do people do in FIGs? What do FIGs look like?

It should be pointed out that as part of a larger project on collaborative learning for the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, we were also interested in the broader issue of trying to understand how collaborative learning, in this case FIGs, could engage students more actively in the learning process.

FIG Selection

Given our interest in collaborative learning, we choose to focus on those FIG groups that were more likely to use collaborative learning strategies, namely the Writing Link FIGs. We used the process of purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to determine which FIGs had the best chances of involving the students in their courses. We interviewed the coordinator of the FIG program and spoke with the Peer Advisors of each of the nine Writing Link FIGs. Based on our observations of the Peer Advisors in their meetings and in their interactions with the other Peer Advisors, and our observations of the Writing Link courses and the FIG meetings, we selected three groups on which to concentrate.

Data Collection

Three one-week site visits were made. The first visit took place during the second week of the 1991 Fall term, the second during the last week of the 1991 Fall term, and the third during the middle of the 1992 Spring term. Data collection consisted of participant observation in 12 classrooms, 43 interviews with 24 students, five interviews with the FIG Coordinator, and contact with five Writing Link instructors. The students interviewed were nine female and 10 male first-year students, and four female and one male upperclass FIG Peer Advisors. Five students were Asian-American, one was Hispanic-American, and 18 were European-American.

Participant observation was conducted in classes, FIG groups, and Peer Advisor meetings. Interviews consisted of informal conversations with students, faculty, and staff; scheduled open-ended interviews with students and staff; informal telephone interviews with key informants; and scheduled interviews with students which followed an informal protocol. The fieldnotes and interview transcripts equalled over 1,000 single-spaced pages of raw data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in an on-going process which enabled us to explore themes as they emerged and to pursue unexpected leads during the second and third site visits. We analyzed the data by reading and rereading the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, assigning codes to portions of the data, identifying emerging themes in the data, and generating hypotheses based on these themes. This process of incorporating emerging themes from the data with hypotheses constructed during the study is characteristic of inductive analysis used in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The strength of inductive analysis is that it facilitates the "grounding" of new models or theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A critical component of the analysis was the collaborative nature of the research. During site visits we met on a daily basis and between site visits on a weekly basis to discuss themes, generate alternative hypotheses, and challenge one another's assumptions. This added to the rigor of the analysis. To make the mechanical aspects of data analysis more manageable (sorting and retrieving the coded data), the mainframe computer package QUALOG was used (Shelly & Sibert, 1987).

The Impact of Freshman Interest Groups on the First Year Experience

As a way of describing our results, we present examples of experiences that students encountered in and around their classes. These reflect what students talked about when we asked them to tell us about their days, or asked them how their classes were. Their reports reflect three important themes that override their comments about individual academic factors. First, FIGs allowed students to interact with a group of peers who were consistent across their classes. Consistently seeing the same people could not be taken for granted at this large university, consequently this aspect of the FIG program was not trivial. Second, this consistency enabled students to form a social network in which other academic support mechanisms could begin to operate. Finally, Writing Link classes were a place where students became engaged with their course content through the peer review writing process. This process reinforced, for some students, the value of integrating their social interactions with their academic work. The combination of these themes--the balance of social engagement with academic engagement--

demonstrates the potential that FIGs have to influence the whole of a student's experience at a university. Each of these themes are illustrated below.

Interactions with Peers

> One of the biggest reasons for joining a FIG group was to meet people. The way the university is set up it is practically impossible to meet people unless you subdivide it into smaller groups. - *freshman male*

As we talked to students, meeting people was the predominant reason given for joining and liking a FIG. Over and over students shared their expectations that the FIG would be a place to meet people on campus and make the large university seem like a smaller place. These expectations were met because the members of a FIG saw each other every day in every class, although FIGs were only one of many ways to meet people. Because the university is the flagship school of the state most students were state residents; many attended high school together. For some students a close high school friend remained a close college friend (some chose to be roommates), while other students sought out new friendships with people they had never met before.

Where a student lived was also a place to meet people. Students who lived in Greek houses or residence halls reported spending lots of time with the people in their halls or houses, while students in off-campus apartments reported more limited contact with neighbors. Students who commuted from their family homes reported minimal amounts of out-of-class contact with peers. Brian, who commuted from home, said that if it weren't for the FIG he wouldn't have met anyone. Chris, another student who commuted from home, remembered feeling lost on the first day of classes but said he didn't feel bad because he was with a whole group of people who were lost. Jennifer, who lived in an off-campus apartment, said, "if I was living in my apartment and I was not in a FIG I would be having a hard time socially. I think it's best to have either both [living in a residence hall and being in a FIG], or one or the other. By living in a dorm you're living with people, . . . you see them every day, and so you're making friends that way. Being in a FIG is very similar."

People who lived in residence halls or in fraternities and sororities reported that they met many people through their living environment, but they too expressed a desire to meet people in classes. Mike lived in a fraternity: "I thought I'd meet people in my classes, because there are all these other people, . . . but there's just too many of them, and you just don't meet people that way. So it turned out that these people [in the FIG], you spend all this time with, you see them every day, and you can't help but to get to know them."

At the end of the quarter students reported that they felt more comfortable going to large lectures knowing that there was a group of people with whom they were familiar. Jennifer put it this way:

> I can't imagine not being in the FIG, I really can't. I would feel so lost. I mean, my history class has about five hundred people in it, and going into that class on the first day by myself completely alone--I would have peed my pants! But having somebody to go with you would make things so much easier. And next quarter, I'm ready [to go into classes alone.]

The comfort of knowing people in classes the first quarter was not the only reason students gave for wanting to meet people. Approximately one third of the students talked about anticipating a long-term payoff from their participation in the FIG. Because the FIGs were organized around an academic major or an academic interest, these students talked about the benefits of knowing students in future classes. One student said "these are probably people that will be here as long as I will be and will probably be in some of the classes I will be in later on." Jeff said, "[the people in the FIG] want to major in business, and I'll probably have them in my classes. So when I do walk in the business school, it won't be like I don't know anybody. I'll see someone I know, and that's good."

Even negative comments about the FIGs support the idea that students wanted to meet people; in fact, students expressed disappointment if that did not happen for them. George, a student who lived on a freshman floor in a dorm, never felt like he made a connection with anyone in his FIG. At the end of the first quarter (and the end of the FIG) he said, "I didn't

find myself just dropping right into the . . . group of people that were like the central core. . . . I feel really alienated, and the FIG didn't really help this all that much because I was already alienated by my FIG." George was finding friends through his roommate, and through some involvement in a musical group on campus, but he was struggling to find people with whom he could talk about intellectual matters. John, a student who commuted, also was disappointed by the lack of connections he made within his FIG or with other students in his classes. He felt that because he commuted and most of his FIG lived on campus, he didn't have anything in common with them, so he didn't talk to them very much.

Our point in recounting the variety of ways to meet people on campus is that overall, the students talked about their desire to meet and get to know people. This desire was expressed by males and females, students living on campus in residence halls or Greek houses, and students commuting from apartments or home. They had hoped that the FIG would be a way to do that within the context of an academic environment. That is, FIGs were an environment that was geared more toward academics and topics they had an academic interest in than the other means of meeting people that were available to them. The students who expressed a desire to meet people with similar academic interests or similar majors were aware that at a university as a large as The University of Washington, the act of declaring a major (not usually done until sophomore year) wouldn't necessarily put them in touch with a group of people with whom they felt they belonged.

The Influence of Peer Interactions on Academic Experiences

The interpersonal dynamics that developed among students in FIGs were different from those that formed in large, non-linked classes. The connections made between students in the groups allowed them to experience classes in ways that they may not have if they were not in a FIG. The development of these interpersonal relationships in the classroom was important because it was against this backdrop of a social network of peers that other academic support mechanisms could begin to operate. Once these were in operation, some students were able to turn towards the material presented in class and their assignments.

To begin with, the comfort that students felt as a result of knowing a core group of peers had implications which counterbalanced the anonymity of large lectures. The structure of the FIG provided its 20 members with an opportunity to meet repeatedly every day. Students in Writing Link FIGs automatically were enrolled in the small-sized Writing Link classes; students who were not in a FIG were unable to register for these classes. In turn, the daily meetings in small classes allowed for a number of informal academic support mechanisms to operate. Belonging to a FIG did not require students to participate in any structured study groups or tutoring, but by being familiar with each other and being in the same classes every day, students in FIGs had an easier time making connections for academic purposes.

FIGs reduced feelings of anonymity and decreased the tendency of students to skip certain classes by providing a group of peers who were known to each other, and who provided peer pressure to attend classes. Although most students talked about skipping large classes, the size of the class alone did not determine whether students skipped it or not. The comments of Jeff and Beth illustrate this point. Jeff said he attended his Writing Link class because everyone, not just the instructor, would notice if he was missing: "The reason why I go usually is because that's a smaller class; if you're missing everyone knows you're gone. And you kind of feel, that's the only class I really feel obligated, like I have to be there every day, so I show up to each class." Beth talked about classes in general: "[A] nice thing about FIGs is that since you know everyone, they really encourage you not to skip out. There's more encouragement not to miss classes. If you go to your first class, then there's everyone telling you to go to your second."

An example of how FIGs counterbalanced the anonymity of large lectures classes was that FIG Peer Advisors compiled and distributed phone lists for their FIGs. Many students said that they used the phone lists when they needed to call someone to get notes from a class they missed, needed clarification about their own lecture notes, or if they had questions about an assignment they were working on. This was especially helpful when they were having difficulty understanding the content of the lecture, either because they couldn't understand the language or the explanation. FIGs in these instances made the class seem smaller because people got to

know each other and had ways of contacting one another. This, in turn, allowed students to verify or clarify the content of the class with one another as they called each other with questions and exchanged notes.

Another way that FIGs influenced the academic experiences of students was that by belonging to a FIG, students readily could find people with whom to study. Although students said that they studied with people from their FIG infrequently, some said that they met to study for major exams. Others spent time together between classes alternately discussing class material, going over homework, and relaxing. In general, students could name one or two people with whom they studied, or whom they would call for help in a particular subject. Many students, however, said that they studied with people on their floor (if they lived in a dorm), people in their Greek house (if they were in a sorority or a fraternity), or they studied alone (both commuters and students who lived on campus said this).

That students did not study exclusively with others from their FIG is important because it points out that the effects of FIG participation had its limits. As they were structured at the time, FIGs altered students' academic experience in some ways, but not in others. The academic support mechanisms that developed within the FIG were not a mandatory element of FIG participation, but every student mentioned them at some point. The mechanisms were informal in that affiliations between people may have shifted throughout the quarter, or a group may have met once to study for an exam, and there were no uniform time demands. What was consistent across the FIGs and within each FIG was that students turned to other members of the FIG at least once during the quarter for purposes of academic support. The FIG provided the opportunity for a network to form, one that could be drawn upon outside of class and beyond the Fall quarter.

Writing Link Classes Enabled Students to Balance Social and Academic Experiences

Although all students utilized the peer review writing process for their papers, only some recognized the advantage of using their network of peers in this way. Many students resisted

the idea that anyone other than the professor could have worthwhile information; therefore they did not like classroom techniques such as discussions and peer review. Other students realized that points of view other than the professor's were valid, and they came to value hearing the opinions of their peers. We focus on examples of these latter types of students in order to emphasize the potential that Writing Link FIGs have in assisting students to grow beyond dualistic forms of learning.

A comment made by Mark focused on the personal, face-to-face nature of the peer review process. In response to a question from the Writing Link instructor he said, "I like comments that are in person because then the person can explain to you what it is they like or don't like or what they don't understand and then you can discuss it with them." While he did not explicitly say that he valued the comments of his peers more or less than those of his instructor, he emphasized the value of explanation and discussion. Other students liked the multiple opportunities for feedback from peers and a professor. Jeff saw value in his peers' comments because of an experience where a peer pointed out something that the professor missed. He talked about his views and those of others:

> Other people don't listen to their [peers'] critiques, they just listen to the teacher's. But I would do both, because the teacher's probably the main one that I'd be listening to and going with. . . . Usually you put the teacher up on a high level and you think, "If she says there's something wrong, then there's got to be something wrong with it". . . . [But] I've seen things where the teacher has not even seen, well, looked at things, and another student would see it, and I'd say, "Well, gee. The student's right. The teacher's wrong. I'm gonna go with this." I've done that.

What made the Writing Link portion of the FIG unique and valuable to students was working repeatedly with a consistent group of trusted peers and explaining their writing to an audience of peers and a professor. Membership in the FIGs was what made it possible for students to take these classes which utilized the peer review process for writing papers. In

addition, the small class size made it possible for students to meet individually with professors. Students felt like they became acquainted with their peers and their professor. As noted in previous sections, FIG students met and became familiar with each other in their daily classes. The writing class became a place where the social dynamics of the FIG experience reinforced the process of learning from one's peers. Having made personal connections with their peers, students then were able to use those connections to tie the learning process to their everyday experiences.

Other students said that they liked the peer review process, but not for the same reasons. These students liked the structured format of the process because it forced them to spend more time on their assignments. For example, George talked about how much he liked his writing class:

> The whole concept [of peer review] was really nice. It's really good because I, like most people, write one draft. Normally, I write one draft and that's it, so it's kind of nice having that structure laid out and having to get some time to work on that before turning in a final draft.

Another student complained about the repetition across her courses, but she liked the fact that by doing the work in her writing class she was prepared for her history class. She also liked that the writing process forced her to put more time into the papers. What she didn't say was that through the writing process she learned more than getting her work done ahead of time. Through the peer review process some students learned that they could be a source of information for their peers, and that they were responsible for getting their work done for their peers (not just for the professor).

From the comments of these students, we see that peer interaction was not the only beneficial aspect of the peer review process. The structure contained in the peer review process also was important in motivating the students to spend more time on class material, and to do so before they turned to it in class. Of course, as one student pointed out, some students still waited until the night before the rough draft was due to start on it. Even so, that meant students

were thinking about it before they might have under the usual circumstances. The idea of providing students with a structured learning experience is seen as essential by some proponents of cooperative learning (Cooper & Mueck, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Slavin, 1983). The comments of these students seem to support this.

Conclusions

By providing students with a way to engage in learning while also engaging socially with their peers, the Writing Link Freshmen Interest Groups were able to address one of the continuing problems facing students in the first year of college, namely the need for both academic as well as social integration. More importantly, they did so in a manner that did not require students to pit one need against the other. First year students in Writing Link FIGs were able to pursue friendships and learning at the same time.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for most college students, especially those attending residential campuses away from home. For these students the demands of social membership in the first year frequently take precedence over the demands of academic work. This may be expressed in the form of sorority/fraternity pledging, membership in student organizations, or time spent with friends "hanging out". Students often pursue social affiliations at the expense of academic work.

This problem is compounded further by the size of many public institutions. In large public universities and colleges where class sizes in the first year typically run in the hundreds, and sometimes are taught by graduate assistants, students commonly report themselves as bored and uninterested in the classroom lectures. They find that learning is a highly individualistic, often alienating experience.

While Freshmen Interest Groups cannot, in themselves, solve the problems of uninteresting classes, they do serve as a type of learning community in which students experience a cluster of courses together in ways which can further their understanding of course

material. More importantly, learning communities generally do more than make learning possible in the first year. By linking the social to the academic, learning communities make for a more powerful learning experience, one that transcends the typically uninvolved academic experience of the first year. And as reported elsewhere, it is an experience that significantly impacts upon both first year learning and persistence into the second year of college (Tinto and Goodsell, 1993).

Nevertheless, it must be observed that in their current form Freshman Interest Groups as constructed at the University of Washington do not completely address one of the continuing problems facing freshmen year programs, namely the absence of significant faculty involvement. As they were constructed in 1991, only the Writing Link faculty were asked to adapt their content to that of another course. Other learning community programs, however, such as the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College, Lee's Honors College at Western Michigan University and the learning community program at LaGuardia Community College, are themselves the product of faculty action. In these programs, faculty, rather than student affairs staff, run the program. As such the issue of academic credit is moot, as the program is an integral part of the academic program.

However constructed, it remains the case that even a modest program such as Freshman Interest Groups can have substantial impacts on first year students. As such, it reinforces our belief that there remains much that still can be done to enhance the first year experience of college students. We should reconsider the nature of our freshman year programs and make them an integral part of the freshman year academic experience. And we should look to learning community models as potentially very powerful ways of altering that experience for the better of both students and institutions.

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